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SUBJECT: JAMAICA/VENEZUELA: FORMER PRIME MINISTER WARNS OF
CHAVEZ'S INFLUENCE IN IMPENDING NATIONAL ELECTIONS

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Classified By: Ambassador Brenda L. Johnson, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1.(C) In impending national elections, the opposition Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) has "good reason to fear" Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's provision of cash to fund the reelection campaign of current Prime Minister (PM) Portia Simpson Miller (PSM), according to former PM Edward Seaga. In his estimate:

-- PSM will call elections if the upcoming Cricket World Cup (CWC) series and/or the Government's budget presentation in April/May lift the spirits of the electorate; if not, she will delay until the end of the year.

-- With its formidable public relations machinery, PSM's ruling People's National Party (PNP) may well come from behind to defeat the JLP.

-- a terrorist attack against the upcoming CWC is unlikely; transportation difficulties between Kingston and Jamaica's north coast are a greater worry.

-- Venezuela is "moving in the direction of bitterness among the people, who face shortages of the basics."
End Summary.

2.(SBU) Edward Seaga served as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Western Kingston for nearly 43 years, as Leader of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) from 1974 until 2005, and as Prime Minister (PM) 1980-89. He is widely credited with having stabilized the Jamaican economy in the 1980s after years of high inflation and deficits. Still alert and active at 77, Seaga remains highly influential among JLP supporters.

Ambassador (accompanied by Poloff) paid a courtesy call on February 9 in his office on the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI), of which he is one of only four Distinguished Fellows.

3.(SBU) Seaga began by expressing satisfaction that the Peace Corps was celebrating its 45th anniversary, noting that he had played a role in bringing the first volunteers to Jamaica back in 1962; for decades the organization had done superb work in the country, and he wished it might receive

more recognition from the media. The Ambassador observed that the last year had been an eventful one in Jamaica, with a new PM and Governor General taking office, preparations for the upcoming Cricket World Cup (CWC) series underway, and widespread speculation about the timing of national elections (which must be held within the next year).

Impending National Elections

4.(C) Seaga said Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller (PSM) had had a brief "window of opportunity" to call elections for February, but that she now was unlikely to do so until after the conclusion of CWC in April. Historically, he observed, in order to capitalize on the "feel good factor" in the nation, PNP (People's National Party) governments had called elections in the wake of major successful events. However, whether CWC would generate such feelings was uncertain: this would depend on the performance of the West Indies team, the economic benefits derived from hosting the series, and whether it all had gone smoothly. The Government also might shape its budget presentation in April/May to generate public gratitude, and then call elections in June. But if neither CWC nor the budget presentation lifted the spirits of the electorate, PSM would delay the elections as long as possible. Seaga said the most recent polls showing the JLP 2-3 points ahead of the PNP in popularity "don't count too much." He recalled that in 2002 the JLP had been ahead until June, but that the PNP Government had used a massive World Youth Cup Festival in July to boost its standing-- and then had gone on to win the elections. At present, the JLP should be further ahead; at least a ten-point lead was needed. The JLP had used a huge annual conference (Reftel A) and revelation of the Trafigura scandal (Reftel B) to boost its support. However, with its formidable public relations machinery, the PNP might well come from behind to win the elections; they had done so before.

Chavez Providing Cash to PNP?

5.(C) In response to Ambassador's inquiry regarding JLP Leader Bruce Golding's recent allegations that Venezuela's Hugo Chavez was providing cash to finance the PNP's reelection campaign (Reftels C, D), Seaga said Golding "had good reason to fear this." In socialist societies, no distinction was drawn between the government and the ruling political party; donations thus flowed easily. Chavez wanted to broaden Venezuela's influence in the Caribbean, but this was not a new policy: he himself had faced the same problem back in 1980, when Carlos Andres Perez (CAP) had funneled support to PM Michael Manley (fortunately, CAP had been out of power before the Jamaican elections). A strong interest in the Caribbean had been part of Venezuela's foreign policy for decades.

6.(C) In response to the Ambassador's observation that much of the available information regarding Cuba's Fidel Castro seemed to come from Chavez these days, Seaga noted that the latter had an interest in portraying himself as an ally and close confidant of the former. Venezuela now was "moving in the direction of bitterness among the people, who face shortages of the basics." Interestingly, Seaga then described a recurring pattern among authoritarian socialist regimes: (a) as in Zimbabwe, misguided economic policies eventually led to chronic shortages; (b) then, the ruling party blamed shopkeepers and merchants for "sabotaging the revolution;" (c) the regime then used this "sabotage" as a pretext to justify further political repression and amass more power.

Crime and Tourism

7.(SBU) Ambassador then inquired about the alarming rise in Jamaica's murder rate over recent months. Seaga pointed out that, historically, whenever the police had focused special attention and cracked down on crime in Kingston, the

criminals quickly had moved to other areas of the country; this pattern now was being repeated. The Ambassador noted that some 72 percent of Jamaica's tourists were from the U.S., and the police needed to curb crime to avoid serious disruption of the vital tourism industry. Seaga observed that "in Jamaica there always has been an underlying understanding: don't interfere with tourism;" this was why few serious crimes were committed against tourists.

Cricket World Cup (CWC)

8.(U) Ambassador then mentioned that the U.S., U.K., and Canada were cooperating with the Caribbean nations in counter-terrorism preparations for CWC. Seaga said he didn't "see the motive for terrorism;" the logistics of a terrorist attack would be difficult, and there would be "only limited damage to the U.S." He was more concerned about the difficulties and delays that many fans would face in traveling back and forth between Kingston and the Jamaica's north coast: from Montego Bay, it may take up to five hours to reach Kingston's Sabina Park stadium; this would cause great frustration among visitors. In his view, a ring road around Montego Bay should have been completed long ago, but certainly in preparation for CWC. Ambassador said she had enjoyed her recent visit to the new stadium in Sabina Park, which was most impressive. Seaga wondered how the new Trelawny stadium would be used after CWC; Ambassador noted she had discussed this question recently with former PM P.J. Patterson (Reftel E), and that perhaps it could become a multi-purpose facility. Seaga said he recently had suggested to the Spanish Ambassador that the Trelawny stadium be used as a soccer camp by visiting Spanish trainers in order to improve the level of play among teams in the north of the island.

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